

Tri-Motor, Tried and True

By GINNY MERRIAM
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The Tin Goose. Flying washboards. Smokejumper planes. The best workhorse plane ever made, or "a noisy, drafty and uncomfortable assault upon the senses."

Whatever they called them, from 1936 through 1968, Missoula residents always heard Johnson Flying Service's Ford Tri-Motors coming. Arguably some of the noisiest planes ever built, the Tri-Motors announced their air presence as soon as they left Hale Field.

"It's a sound all of its own," long-time Missoula resident Sam Nicolet remembered Tuesday, when he was an honored guest on a flight of a restored Tri-Motor visiting Missoula. "You could tell every time a Tri-Motor was flying over Missoula."

Penn Stohr, pilot and senior vice president of Evergreen International Airlines, flew the restored 1928 aircraft to Missoula from McMinnville, Ore., Tuesday. It's authentic, he said.

"When you're looking down, you can see people running out of their houses," he said. "By the time you get there, you've made good friends."

Yes, the planes were slow, too, with an advertised top speed of about 135 miles an hour. And, without any hydraulic assistance, they took some muscle to fly.

"It takes a lot of work, a lot of physical strength," said Stohr, who usually flies 747s. "It wallows around so much." And, he said later, "It's goosey in a crosswind."

Smokejumping's workhorse pays a visit to old friends

But, Stohr said, "The Ford's always been the centerpiece of smokejumping and Johnson. It was the first big airplane in Missoula."

The eccentric traits of the Tri-Motors were just what endeared them to Johnson Flying Service and its main client, the U.S. Forest Service. A slower plane makes it easier for smokejumpers to jump, and a door that's behind the wing ensures that jumpers won't get hung up. The Tri-Motor — the first all-metal airplane — could operate from very short runways, was very maneuverable by a good pilot and could carry 4,000 to 5,000 pounds of freight, Stohr said. Its light weight made it a good performer.

"They're airplanes that were built to do a job," said Orman LaVoie, a Johnson employee and pilot from 1939 to 1949. "When they first started the smokejumpers, they were so well-suited."

Ford Motor Company's Stout Metal Airplane Company built the pioneering planes from 1929 to 1932, when the improved technology offered by DC-2s coupled with Ford's decision to get out of the airplane business meant the end of the Tri-Motors.

But that only made them more affordable for Bob Johnson, writes Steve Smith in "Fly the Biggest

Piece Back." Originally priced between \$45,000 and \$55,00, the planes were selling for as low as \$10,000 when Johnson picked up his first one in 1936.

The plane visiting Missoula for dedication of the Forest Service's new National Wildland Firefighters Memorial at the Aerial Fire Depot Wednesday underwent a \$4 million renovation at the Harrah's Collection in Reno, Nevada. It's one of the remaining four planes of the 199 Tri-Motors made that are still flying. Now owned by Evergreen, which purchased Johnson Flying Service in 1975, it has only 160 flight hours on it since the rebuild.

"It's exactly the way it came out of the factory," said Stohr, who flew from Oregon with Evergreen Director of Flight Standards and Missoula native Doug Smuin and Evergreen Director of In-Flight Services Shirley Martin. "Everything's brand new."

The Tri-Motor's body, shaped like a whale with angles, is covered with corrugated metal. Its enormous wings, designed to use much less strut support than previous airplanes, are about three feet thick where they join the plane's body. The three engines are mounted on the plane's nose and under each wing. The wheels bear the same tires used on Ford's automobiles.

Inside, the plane sports 12 dark-green-leather seats (pilot LaVoie remembers that the doors were removed and the seats replaced with benches for smokejumping), wood paneling, curtains, braided ropes for hanging on, fresh-air vents and even a

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lavatory. The pilots' steering wheels are wooden.

Before Tuesday's private demonstration flight got off the ground, Sam Nicolet remembered "hanging around" Hale Field as a

boy in the 1920s and '30s. Because neither the planes nor the airfield had lights, the Tri-Motors' pilots tried to come in before nightfall. When they were late, a crowd of pilots' wives and onlookers gathered at the landing strip — first at Hale Field and later at the new county airport — and turned on their automobile headlights to light the pilots' way.

"My wife — we've been married almost 54 years — every time we'd go for a ride, we'd end up at the airport," Nicolet recalled.

Landing the plane in Missoula dredged up memories for Stohr, too. His father, Penn Stohr Sr., who was dubbed "The Miracle Pilot of Idaho," flew for Johnson for 24 years.

"I remember getting into these things when I was two years old," the junior Stohr said. "I remember sneaking out to the airport to watch them."

Evelyn Hughes, whose late husband Jack Hughes was Johnson's chief pilot for many years, visited the fire depot Tuesday for one more look at the planes her husband flew. When Johnson sold the last three Tri-Motors, it was Jack Hughes who ferried them to their new owners around the country.

"He loved them," she said. "He really loved them."